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ABSTRACT

The typical approach to curriculum in the English language arts fits well with the traditional, content-centered approach to instruction. Such an approach to curriculum, however, is appropriate to a pedagogy that construes knowledge as fixed and transmittable but inappropriate to a pedagogy that views learning as constructed by the learner rather than inherited intact. The sense of an appropriate domain for conversation is at the center of an ongoing set of studies at the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning. The research focuses on what guides teachers' decisions about curriculum. What is emerging is a view of curriculum as defining a domain for culturally significant conversations into which teachers want students to be able to enter. Four principles of effective curricular conversations are: (1) an effective curriculum must be built around language episodes of high quality; (2) an effective curriculum requires an appropriate breadth of materials to sustain conversation; (3) the parts of an effective curriculum are interrelated; and (4) for a curriculum to be effective, instruction must be geared to helping students enter into the curricular conversation. English language arts educators need to develop new ways to talk about curriculum, ways that will further attempts to implement a constructivist pedagogy rather than frustrate them. (Contains 27 references.) (RS)

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# Toward Thoughtful Curriculum: Fostering Discipline-Based Conversation in the English Language Arts Classroom

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The encouragement of thoughtfulness (reasoning, higher literacy, higher order thinking) has become almost a platitude in the current wave of educational reform. We must teach students to arrive at new understandings, to think for themselves, to become independent knowers and doers, the argument goes, if the United States is to remain competitive in an international economy. Brett, however, talking about his senior high Contemporary Literature class, offers a different view of the things he is learning to do in school:

> ...she wanted us to figure it out so she asked us questions about it. I didn't really enjoy it that much, because it seems like most of the teachers know the answer they are looking for and then they will sort of hint up to that answer and they won't be satisfied until they get that answer, even though they are trying to make us think for ourselves. It is odd like that. . . . I don't think it would really bother me if their objectives were to teach us like that, but they say their objective is to make us think for ourselves, but if they wanted to take the attitude that "Now I'm to explain this to you how the author intended you to feel," it wouldn't be so bad.

"It is odd like that," says Brett, and his reactions are all too typical of those of other students I and my colleagues have studied in an ongoing examination of curriculum and instruction in English (see Applebee, 1993b; Brody, DeMilo, & Purves, 1989; Langer, 1992a; Marshall, 1989). I will argue in this article that as a profession we have boxed ourselves into this kind of teaching-- where we want students to think for themselves and to get the right answer-- in part by how we think about curriculum. My argument will be based on current research and practice within the English language arts, but I believe the inherent contradictions that are apparent in the teaching of English can be traced throughout the school curriculum (see, for example, Langer, 1992b).

The English curriculum as we know it dates to the late nineteenth century, when a variety of separate studies (reading, literary history, composition, grammar, spelling, and oratory, among others) were collected together into the school subject called English (on the early history, see Applebee, 1974). Along with these disparate parts came a very particular tradition of British and American literature, reflected in a 1907 listing of most frequently taught works. It included among others Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Silas Marner, Milton, The Merchant of Venice, Burke's Speech on Conciliation with America, Lowell's Vision of Sir Launfal, The Rime of the Ancient

Mariner, and Ivanhoe (Applebee, 1974). The list, like the tradition from which it was drawn, was largely white, male, and Eurocentric. But above all it was authoritative, implying a body of knowledge, a universe of things to know that gave the new subject of English a place and a legitimacy within the curriculum as a whole.

A recent study of the high school English curriculum highlighted the extent to which the content of English remains defined by this tradition, reflected in the works that are chosen to be taught, as well as in the instructional materials that accompany them (Applebee, 1992, 1993b). With only a few exceptions, the selections remain white, male, and Eurocentric, and the materials expect "right answers" from students, rather than thoughtful interpretations that might legitimately vary. Not surprisingly, a related study directed by my colleague Alan Purves found a similar emphasis in the tests that students are asked to take: the questions that are posed about literature differ hardly at all from those that might be asked of expository prose (Brody, DeMilo, & Purves, 1989). Louise Rosenblatt (1978) captured the spirit of these materials when she lamented a basal reader that asked, "What facts does this poem teach us?" Purves' favorite, offered in the same spirit, was a true-or-false question: "Huck Finn was a good boy." If we think of literature as Rosenblatt once described it, as quiet conversation about good books, what we have instead is a kind of *Trivial Pursuits*-- and one in which what should count as a right answer is not always obvious.

**Changing Notions of Curriculum**

The typical approach to curriculum in the English language arts fits very well with this traditional, content-centered approach to instruction. Such an approach to curriculum involves, first, a thorough parsing of what students should know, and, second, the organization of those parts into elaborate scope and sequence charts. The current technology for building curricula was developed in the early part of this century by such theorists as Franklin Bobbitt (1924), and was elaborated by several generations of scholars and teachers who were committed to task analysis and to a belief in the orderly development of subskills, the accumulation of the necessary building blocks of knowledge and skill.

Such an approach to curriculum is perfectly appropriate to a pedagogy that construes knowledge as fixed and transmittable-- as something "out there" to be memorized by students. It is appropriate to a curriculum of "Great Books" or of rules of grammar and rhetoric, of phonics and vocabulary practice. It is not appropriate, however, to a pedagogy that views learning as constructed by the learner rather than inherited intact, or that emphasizes thoughtfulness and reflection. For teachers with such goals, the behaviorist and positivist origins of current conceptions of curriculum are at best discomforting, and as a result the bulky guides that have been produced lie untouched on most bookshelves.

Within the teaching of English language arts, progressive theorists have in recent years by and large avoided issues of curriculum. Cope and Kalantzis (1993), in a decidedly unfavorable review, characterize the new pedagogy as favoring "unstructured experience, 'natural' immersion, and an eclectic pastiche of curriculum content" (P. 18). Their comments are harsh, but not particularly unfair: as we have rushed to improve the teaching of English language arts over the past two decades, our concern with the day-to-day texture of instruction has led us to ignore, or even reject, issues of curriculum. The English Coalition Conference (Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford,

1989), for example, dismissed the details of curriculum as of primarily local concern, and limited itself to the presenting "vignettes" of effective practice.

### The Need for Curriculum

Though institutionalized curricular frameworks play little role in most classrooms, curriculum in another sense is alive and well: Effective teachers have a sense of what they are doing and why, and they create within their classrooms a sense of coherence and direction that students recognize (and, indeed, to which students also contribute). This sense of coherence and direction has little to do with formal lists of content to be covered, however, and much more to do with the teacher's sense of what is central and what is less so in a particular language arts class over the course of a year, and the texture of conversation, oral and written, that is encouraged around those central issues. Whether it is the narrative coherence of a show and tell episode in first grade or the explorations of myths and legends in grade 7, the teacher establishes and maintains a sense of the curricular domain, choosing activities that are appropriate to the domain, encouraging conversation around it, and intervening if the class begins to drift too far afield.

### Curriculum as a Domain for Culturally Significant Conversations

This sense of an appropriate domain for conversation is at the center of an ongoing set of studies at the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning. In these studies, my research team and I are collaborating with a number of experienced teachers at different grade levels to explore what it is that gives them and their students a sense of continuity and coherence within their English language arts activities. The research team has been focusing in particular on what guides teachers' decisions about curriculum: what to teach, when to shift gears, how to capitalize on serendipitous moments, and why the best laid plans sometimes go astray.

What is emerging from this project is a view of curriculum as defining a domain for culturally significant conversations into which we want our students to be able to enter (Applebee, 1993a). In school, those conversations are most often disciplinary, set within the traditional boundaries of school subjects (language arts, science, history, math, the arts), but they can be inter- or cross-disciplinary, drawing on texts and concepts from a variety of fields (e.g., environmental studies). This sense of education as helping students enter into an ongoing cultural conversation is an old one, though it has typically been a passing metaphor rather than taken seriously as a way to think about the curriculum (see, for example, Burke, 1941; pp 110-111). Gerald Graff makes typical use of this metaphor in his comments in Beyond the Culture Wars (1992):

> In short, reading books with comprehension, making arguments, writing papers, and making comments in a class discussion are social activities. They involve entering into a cultural or disciplinary conversation, a process not unlike initiation into a social club. (p. 77)

As language arts teachers, the "literacy club" is usually at the center of our concern, though by high school this may be differentiated into separate and only sometimes interrelated emphases on literature, composition, and language study.

A curriculum that is viewed as a domain for conversational action is inherently interactional: it includes the content knowledge emphasized in older versions of curriculum, but insists that such content is of interest for the conversation-- oral and written-- that it evokes. Content that does not invoke further conversation is of no interest; it is dead as well as deadly, certain to bring the curricular conversation to a halt rather than leading it forward.

Because the conversations that are embodied in the school curriculum are themselves embedded in larger universes of discourse, as students learn to enter into them they also are learning the larger "rules of the game"-- the ways of knowing and doing that characterize the larger conversation. They learn, for example, what counts as effective argument and evidence in science and history and literature. These are traditional goals (captured in such phrases as learning "scientific method" or "historical perspective"), but they are goals that have usually been overwhelmed in practice by the curricular focus on the accompanying specific content (Langer, 1992b)-- exactly the tension that Brett noted in his comments at the beginning of this article.

It is the teacher's often tacit sense of what a conversation is about that shapes the curriculum in both its broader and narrower dimensions. At the broader level, it guides the selection of readings, writing assignments, and other activities for a particular class; at the narrower, it leads a teacher to encourage some kinds of comments in writing or class discussion, and to discourage others. An activity as straightforward as reading a story to a class of kindergartners may look radically different depending upon the conversation within which the teacher wishes to embed it (Martinez & Teale, 1993).

**What Makes a Curriculum Work?**

In our ongoing study of how teachers create a coherent curriculum, several features have begun to emerge as characteristic of conversational domains that promote coherent and cumulative conversations. (Not surprisingly, these features of successful curriculum are closely linked with more general descriptions of effective conversation, in particular those described by the linguist H.P. Grice, 1975). The four principles of effective curricular conversations are: quality, quantity, relatedness, and manner. Each of these principles puts a new and more focused face on familiar aspects of curriculum planning, and also highlights particular issues that confront us as we struggle to define an appropriate language arts curriculum for today's students.

Quality: An Effective Curriculum Must Be Built Around Language Episodes of High Quality

The first principle underlying an effective curricular conversation is that the contributions must be of high quality. Quality has at least two aspects. First and foremost, contributions to the conversation must be true and accurate, supported where appropriate by relevant argument and evidence. This seems a straightforward enough requirement, yet in fact it is more complicated to accomplish than it might seem. The state of Texas, for example, has recently learned how difficult it is even to insist that science and social studies materials contain no errors of fact, forcing textbook companies to make extensive and expensive changes to books submitted for

adoption. At a more difficult level, what is considered appropriate in reading and language arts curricula has changed considerably over the past 20 years in response to questions about the fairness and accuracy in the depiction of women and minorities. And how do we treat a book such as The Education of Little Tree, when we discover that its author, rather than being a Native American, was a leader in the Ku Klux Klan? Such questions all have to do with the quality of the conversation within a particular domain.

The second aspect of quality has to do with the ability of the material introduced to support meaningful conversation. In the language arts, this issue often arises in tension with a concern for making our instruction "relevant" to our students' needs and interests. In the interest of relevance, we have too often reached out to the mediocre and second rate, and then grown frustrated when we and our classes discover together how little there may be to say about it (for a trenchant critique of materials selected for relevance rather than quality, see Lynch & Evans, 1963). Relevance and quality do not need to stand in tension with one another, but too often we have treated them as though such tension were inevitable.

Quantity: An Effective Curriculum Requires An Appropriate Breadth of Materials to Sustain Conversation

Curricular conversations must be built around enough material to sustain them: not too much and not too little. The essence of conversation is that it must allow interaction: among teacher and students, among students, among students and the texts they read or watch or listen to. If there is too much material to cover-- and pressure for coverage is usually the villain here-- open conversations are almost of necessity supplanted by closed ones, in which the teacher reverts to telling students what they need to know.

Conversations can be thwarted just as quickly by too little material as by too much, however. In the interests of time and coverage, lessons are sometimes orchestrated around "representative" or "typical" material, selected because it captures some essential features of the topic under discussion (whether of the nature of the Greek hero or the structure of a haiku). Such materials do not provide students with enough scope to enter the conversation on their own, leaving them with little option except to accept whatever points the teacher or text wants to make about the examples.

Relatedness: The Parts of an Effective Curriculum Are Interrelated

One of the most important features of effective domains for conversation is the sense of relatedness among the parts. It is this which makes cumulative conversations possible, and that provides a sense of direction to what has been covered, and what remains to come.

The English language arts have a long-standing predisposition to come unglued-- to separate into the myriad individual studies from which they were assembled at the turn of the century (grammar, reading, literary history, spelling, philology, oratory, composition, among others). They also have a tendency to absorb any new activity that may be proposed, simply on the grounds that in one way or another the activity involves language. Thus we teach students to make introductions, answer the telephone, write thank you letters, criticize advertisements, read the telephone book, interpret myths and legends, write reports for science and social studies, ad infinitum-- with little sense of what is central and what is peripheral to our classes

or to our subject area. While each such activity may be perfectly reasonable in its own right, together they do not constitute a curricular domain.

Thematic teaching has been one traditional way to insure that the various parts of a curriculum are related in a more or less integral fashion. As a profession, however, we have given surprisingly little attention to how to construct effective thematic units, or to what kinds of relatedness will in fact foster rich conversations (Lipson, Valencia, Wixson, & Peters, 1993). The activities gathered together around many themes suffer from acute superficiality: They result from brainstorming about "related" activities without a re-weaving of the result into any kind of conceptual whole. Thus we may question whether students' first encounters with Shakespeare will benefit from building a model of the Globe Theatre, or whether a classroom collection of teddy bears brought from home will add depth to a discussion of Ira sleeps over, simply because Ira happens to have a teddy bear (Silva & Delgado-Larocco, 1993).

Even when new materials are introduced for good reasons, the principle of relatedness may require a thorough recasting of the conversational domain before the new additions become effective. In our studies, this has been particularly evident in classrooms where teachers have begun to broaden their curriculum to include more multicultural material. These noncanonical materials, almost by definition, do not fit well into traditional analyses of historical periods, literary devices, major genres, or even familiar themes; if they are to be something more than a part of an awkward mosaic, such works require a reconstruing of the domain itself.

In one of our case studies, for example, we traced the transformation of a 10th grade introductory American literature survey to include a variety of alternative traditions (in particular, Native American, African American, and Hispanic). The first changes involved the addition of material to the existing curriculum-- a process that left too little time for much discussion of any sort to develop, and that left the new material "hanging" outside of the framework of the rest of the course. Only when the teacher began to reconstrue the curricular domain itself, moving the focus away from an analysis of symbols and imagery within each work toward a discussion of multiple perspectives on shared events within each period (Native American versus settlers' views of the Colonial Era, for example), did traditional and alternative works begin to work together within a shared conversational domain.

Interestingly, as the conversational domain shifted, two books that had in previous years been very successful were initially rejected by the students: The Great Gatsby and The Scarlet Letter. When we looked more closely at how these books had been discussed, it became apparent that the teacher had tried to introduce them as part of conversations left over from previous years-- conversations that focused on structure and symbolism and neglected the new conversational domain. In each case, students felt the discontinuity and lost interest in the books (which were taught at quite different times in the course). In such circumstances, the teacher has a clear choice as the curriculum continues to evolve: to drop these two texts altogether, or to invite them into the new conversation (where both clearly could fit).

Manner: For a Curriculum to be Effective, Instruction Must Be Geared to Helping Students Enter into the Curricular Conversation

What we learn is in large part a function of how we learn it. If students are in fact to learn to enter into culturally significant conversations, the process of instruction must be

orchestrated to enable and support that participation. Judith Langer and I have discussed the features of such learning environments under the general rubric of instructional scaffolding (Applebee & Langer, 1983; Langer & Applebee, 1986; Langer 1991), and our work is part of a much larger universe of research aimed at developing a more effective, constructivist pedagogy (e.g., Cazden, 1979; Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984). This work has focused on such characteristics as allowing students room to develop their own understandings in their reading and writing; insuring that activities are structured to support a natural sequence of thought and language; and in turn helping students internalize a repertoire of effective strategies of language and thought that they can use in new contexts. It is here that a reconceptualization of curriculum as a domain for culturally significant conversations reconnects with recent work in constructivist pedagogy, offering the possibility of a more unified theory of teaching and learning.

**Conclusion**

When we think of a curriculum as a domain for culturally significant conversation, several interesting things happen. First, it creates a natural integration of the language arts, as students learn to enter into a conversation with a multitude of related voices, and to add their own voices to the conversation. This includes the integration of current concerns into a context of history and culture-- what others have said and written-- that constitutes a true cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1987).

Second, if the conversations are real, they also create a meaningful context for what we ask students to read and write and talk about. As they are initiated into the literacy club, they learn what is "interesting" and "relevant" and "significant"-- seemingly simply notions that in fact are context dependent. Gerald Graff (1992), continuing the point cited earlier, notes how difficult it is even for college students to respond when this context is removed:

> Choose a topic that interests you, freshman writers are told; organize your paper logically around a central idea, and remember to support your thesis with specific illustration and evidence. Such advice is usually more paralyzing than helpful because it factors out the social conversation that reading, writing, and arguing must be part of in order to become personally meaningful. (p. 77)

Graff's comments are just as relevant to students at other levels of schooling if the approach to curriculum strips away a sense of the larger cultural conversation within which school activities are embedded.

Third, if we build curricula in which texts are related in meaningful ways, learning becomes cumulative and reinforcing. This week's reading changes our perspective on what we read last month-- and will change itself in light of what we read later in the year. It is through their sense that the conversation has been cumulative and self-reflective that teachers and students alike develop a sense of progress and direction in the curriculum as a whole-- a sense of where they have been as well as where they are going. In our studies, we are finding that higher-achieving students usually try to create their own sense of the whole, whether or not the curricular domain has been structured to support this. At the same time, this is one of the areas of curriculum planning where students in average or lower-ability tracks are often short-changed.

In an attempt to accommodate high levels of absence and high turnovers in enrollment, we too often rely on day-to-day planning where everyone can have a "fresh start." One unintended but inevitable consequence of such planning, however, is that the conversation cannot become cumulative and self-reinforcing; students are unable to help one another enter into the conversation, to "catch on" rather than "catch up," because they are all starting over each day. Without a larger whole to define what is interesting and meaningful, students and teachers struggle to sustain any conversation at all.

In summary, I have been arguing that it is time for all of us in the English language arts to develop new ways to talk about curriculum, ways that will further our attempts to implement a constructivist pedagogy rather than frustrate them. That means moving away from formulations of curriculum that inadvertently reinforce an emphasis on content knowledge rather than ways of knowing and doing. My reconstrual of curriculum as a domain for culturally significant conversation is offered as a first step in that new conversation.

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